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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the unity of the Speech Communication Association (SCA). To keep the SCA from fragmenting further into isolated factions, the paper urges SCA members to maintain an awareness of their common goals within the broad context of the term "communication," to interact with one another in the research and study of not only communications methods but also communications materials, and to view the SCA as a common forum rather than as a protective umbrella. (RL)

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AN UMBRELLA FOR THREE
The Unity of SCA

Western Speech Communication Association November 22, 1977

It is a particular pleasure for me to be here with you in Phoenix, since the Southwest has been a second home for me for many years, and within two more years I expect to become a permanent resident of Arizona's neighbor state, New Mexico. The Western Association has in it many, many friends and colleagues of long standing--and so I in no sense feel like a visitor here today. It is as a friend and colleague that I wish to speak.

Association presidents tend to worry about the unity of the group over which they preside, despite the fact that at least some members of the group find that worry totally needless. Past presidents of SCA have worried; the first yearbook of I.C.A. makes clear that I.C.A. presidents have worried. To what avail? Should we simply accept the comfort of those Association members who say, "Look! Why fret about what holds us together? We come together by historical accident, we move in many directions. The Speech Communication Association is best looked upon simply as an umbrella organization."

But at the same time, I am aware of those members who spoke up at the General Session devoted to open discussion of goals, during the San Francisco convention last December. Many of them, judging from the reports submitted by table leaders, object to the umbrella metaphor. That metaphor causes rather than reduces friction, they said. True, the response of the membership to the

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idea of the goals session was not so broad as I had hoped. Some of the people who are critical of the Association because they say it does not respond to the membership were not to be found at the session. But some 200 concerned individuals did come, and I found what they had to say very much worth hearing.

I think they are right about the unbrella metaphor. Indeed, I have taken as my "text" for these remarks a phrase from Lewis Carroll's "A Sea Dirge"--though there are days when I think I might equally well have taken a text from another of his works and called it "Wallace in Wonderland." "There are certain things," says the speaker in "A Sea Dirge," "that I hate." Spiders, ghosts, the income tax, the sea. And in this lists of hates is "an umbrella for three." If you've tried walking under a bumbershoot with three people, no matter how congenial the group, you know that somebody is likely to get rained on. Probably two out of the three of you. The notion of some 6,000 people (the membership of SCA) huddled under a protective covering which doesn't cover, seeking refuge from attacking elements, is a curiously obnoxious conception. I hate umbrellas for three. I don't even find umbrellas for two very satisfactory. And an umbrella for 6,000 seems to me probably even worse than the income tax or spiders. Far worse than ghosts, which can be rather fun. (I leave out of account the poem's strange distaste for the sea!)

For SCA, the sense of the umbrella as a protective covering is peculiarly unfortunate, it seems to me. Too often members of our profession have behaved, indeed, as if they required protection--from the English Department, from the Administration, from the Historians or the Psychologists or the Medical School

or the Linguists. But surely that day is past, for many of us. It still rains on some days, sure. Sometimes there is a downpour. One or the other of us needs an umbrella on occasion. But an umbrella for three, or for 6,000?

It is easy enough to dismiss the concern about the metaphor as simply whimsical. But don't do that. They have a point, those people who find that friction arises from it. It might be possible to argue that engineers, dentists, and journalists ought to form an umbrella organization because they are all vaguely similar in being "professionals," but who would seriously consider membership in their association? Oh, a few, I suspect. What a wonderland that might be. Doubtless it is a bias of mine, but to join a group just to be a groupie, without care for the function of the group, doesn't strike me as being worth $60 a year and the commitment to work which a group like SCA involves.

As members of a discipline, we people in Speech Communication (that awful phrase, as I see it) get into strange predicaments. We often resist growth, for example: We resist the study of communication and part of our membership withdraws and quite properly forms I.C.A. We resist certain currents in theatre, and part of our membership quite properly forms A.T.A. We somehow manage to hamper the growth of speech pathology and audiology, and part of our membership quite properly forms A.S.H.A. I have in the past heard people in my own area of concern, interpretation, talk about forming an organization of their own--or publishing a journal of their own.

It would be possible to argue--some have done so--that what remains in S.C.A. after these spin-offs is what belongs in SCA. I don't find that a persuasive

view. We still keep vestiges of these spin-offs within our ranks, but I think we have lost something because the larger bodies have left. There have been too many cases, in the history of our discipline, where division has led to gradual weakening and death. Within an individual university, theatre may become a separate department; clinical interests form a separate department; radio and television and film go to some alliance with journalism. What remains (whatever it is called--Speech, Speech Communication, Rhetoric, for example) often finds itself strategically and tactically vulnerable.

Strategies and tactics are not unimportant, in these days of tight budgets and reexamined curricula. But the larger issue remains, I think, the question of center. There is little likelihood that SCA, under whatever name, will ever bring ICA and ASHA and ATA back "into the fold." That fold, like the fold of Wordsworth's aged shepherd Michael, will never be finished--our Lukes have left us, and surely they have found a better fate than Wordsworth's Luke. But we can do better than we are doing by the sons and daughters who remain. What incentive are we offering our Theatre Division, or our Speech and Language Sciences Division, or our Forensics Division, or our Mass Communication Division (I could go on, but I shall stop there) to remain with us? What do we do--hold out our umbrella and say, "Keep dry if you can?" Why do we quarrel about whether we are an organization of scholars or an organization of teachers? About whether we are scientists or humanists? About whether we do or do not wish to rub elbows with behaviorists, with communication theorists, with rhetoricians?

I must not pretend to speak with any authority of those areas within SCA in

which I have no competence. There are many of them! But I can, I think, say some things from the perspective of my own interests (literature, interpretation, theatre, criticism) which bear on larger problems.

In his presidential address to I.C.A. in June, 1977,[1] Richard Budd spoke of the subservience of ICA members to methods of inquiry developed by others. He spoke of ICA's failure to seem truly responsive to the need for "an appropriate forum for divergent points of view," as he put it. He pointed to a too narrow restriction to empirical science, to "the emergence of a more fragmented and uncoordinated pattern of study and research." "Only a cursory review of citation indices bears out the fact," he said, "that we are citing works of scholars in other disciplines to a much greater extent than scholars outside our field seem to find our works useful." "Our apparent appetite for legitimization through research protocol and the consequences of its inherent problem-orientation have to some extent had an attenuating effect upon the conceptual base of our discipline." He quoted the sociologist Nisbet as warning against too great an emphasis upon method at the expense of the size and significance of the ideas being methodically examined.

Budd's remarks were certainly not an attack upon ICA, but a serious inquiry into the health of an organization to which he is committed. I would raise similar questions about my own particular areas of concern. In interpretation, we have for far too long a time borrowed our methods of inquiry from others; we have never seriously committed ourselves, as a Division within the Association, to long-range and coordinated patterns of research and study. It is no secret that scholars in other disciplines have not, until very recent-

ly, taken our scholarship to be useful. Too often we have lamented the rain, opened our bumbershoots, and hidden. I suspect that other Divisions within SCA could make similar diagnoses of their dis-eases.

At the same time, we tend to resist cross-pollination within the Association. Interpretation folk do not generally take kindly to the interest of empiricists. I remember vividly the report of one of my doctoral candidates recently. She described to a graduate director at another institution an empirical study she was undertaking with respect to imaging and metaphoring. The graduate director said in astonishment--and apparently in horror--"You don't mean that the Department of Interpretation at Northwestern is approving an empirical study as a dissertation topic!" And apparently I had acquired, myself, a reputation (the source of which I cannot discover) for being anti-empiricist.

I have said on more than one occasion that Speech Communication as a discipline seems to me supremely inter-disciplinary, since the processes of communication do not take place except in the presence of substance. The human being is by nature intentional, and intentionality reaches out in all directions. One cannot effectively study the process, in the last analysis, without comprehending the relationships intended. In discussing communication as process, David Berlo reminds us that while communication is by its nature social, it is so not by virtue of any requirement that it involve two or more people but in virtue of its occurrence through "social coding," "subject to a history and future of shared agreement as to the coding rules."[2] It seems to me that his point is highly useful to us. Our discipline need not, it seems to me, take the speaker in front of an audience as its central model--nor the

reader in front of an audience, nor the actor, nor the eye of the camera. In our dismay at the notion that the message-receiver model might overwhelm other concerns, we lose track of the notion that our own special perspectives may also be too narrow to provide the model we require.

A certain amount of ink has been spilled, for example, among interpreters over the question of whether interpretation is or is not properly to be called "communication." I have myself engaged in the quarrel--not because I think that interpreters do not communicate (they had better!) but because the word communication in at least one of its widely used senses seems to me the wrong word for the relationship between poem and reader. I have never been comfortable with the notion that communication involves more (by any necessity) than the significant conjunction of poem and a single (even silent) reader. The poem does not suffer, in my view, in any essential sense, in the absence of a wider, public audience. An audience of one (the reader) is enough to provide the essential experience. It seems to me simply not true that the interpreter is not engaging in interpretation unless he is in front of others. (This is not to say, obviously enough, that the larger audience is not useful, desirable, itself significant, etc.) But interaction between poem and reader in terms of the "social coding" (to use Berlo's phrase, though in an extension which he may or may not accept) lies in a primary sense at the heart of our interest in interpretation. The poem intends; the reader intends. Intentionality on both sides of the process involves both certain agreed-upon codes and certain more-or-less private fundings of those codes. How do the two parties get together? That, it seems to me, is the question to which our discipline addresses itself, whether the two parties be a reader and a poem, a viewer and

a television program, Irving Rein at the breakfast table and the car dealer's ad. in the morning Chicago Tribune, the teacher and the student, the linguist and his sentence, the actor and his play, the play and its public audience, the minister and his congregation. Indeed, it is interesting to extend the analogy beyond the range of live persons and to consider the confrontation between one statement and another. What are the codes which are operative? How can they best be studied?

And why study them? Not simply, I think, because the solving of codes is stimulating. But because it is crucial in our lives to understand ourselves as social creatures. Man is a social creature, and there is no point in forgetting that, overlooking it, pretending it isn't true, wishing it weren't. We can never understand either ourselves or others if we try to separate process, method, from the significance of the ideas being processed, methodized, communicated.

It is no secret to my colleagues in interpretation that what I have called the process of matching has become for me the central issue in teaching interpretation. There is something marvellously exciting, for me, in the notion that the poem is a body, a man-made act which imitates other man-made acts and is itself capable of being raised to the level of act-in-process through its instrumentation by the body of the reader. But the poem-as-act cannot be comprehended by one who will not recognize its intentions, its assumptions, its (if you will) "code." The code is never fully-fleshed. Parts of it remain forever in shadow, as someone has said. In the actualization or constitution of the poem, the reader's (the interpreter's) own codes come into play,

and the successful matching of the two acts is a marvellously intricate and delicate process. With a great poem, it is also endless; one never gets it all in King Lear, for example, and as a result one extends and extends one's own codes by returning again and again to Lear. The size of Lear makes worthwhile, it seems to me, all the labor one must expend upon the process of matching. In this sense of the word, communication (or communion, which seems to me, in one of its senses, an apt substitute) is indeed what interpretation is all about.

But I think that--again, in this sense--it is what our association is all about. We cannot and must not stop with an examination of method, but must concern ourselves with what is methodized. For us (as apart from other kinds of students of literature, for example), it is not enough to study syntax and language patterns, though they are part of the code through with the poem speaks; our concern is with how the poem speaks to us, and how we speak to it (since I think that we do indeed speak to it.) It may ultimately be found (though I doubt it) that the poem exists as an ideal structure predictably repeatable through time; but in any event, that is not the concern of the teacher of interpretation, however much it may appeal as a central concern to the phenomenologist. It is the social event (to lean upon Berlo once again) which most intimately concerns us.

Any teacher of interpretation knows how far-reaching are the questions posed by the codes in which poems speak. Literature peers over the fence, through the fence, under the fence at anthropology, at philosophy, at sociology, at psychology, at history, at political science, at--you pick the field! One cannot fully read or teach Greek drama in the absence of other knowledge about

the Greeks--indeed, without often a painful awareness that some of the code cannot ever be recovered through the historical sense alone. So, too, with our engagement with other realms of communication. It is desperately short-sighted to study communication and the law without adequate knowledge of the law; or communication and health care without some knowledge of health care; or communication and the Black experience without some knowledge of the Black experience.

I am willing to say--and I hope that some of you will agree with me--that more and more of our scholars are equipping themselves to study communication in this broad sense. Not enough--there are never enough--but more. That seems to me a very good sign. Whatever is to be said of the run-of-the-mill teacher of communication, there are at least a few first-rate teachers, and we need to value them. They certainly are not all in universities. But neither are they all in high schools or community colleges. Some of them, indeed, are not in the academic setting at all.

But they are in the best sense our colleagues, whether or not they are teachers. It doesn't matter whether one chooses to be a research person or a classroom teacher; whether one chooses to combine those two activities; whether one chooses to be a "practitioner" in a non-academic profession; whether one chooses to be a film-maker, a television script-writer, a lawyer, a minister. Whatever the central social question exists, "How do the parties get together?", communication problems exist. That, I take it, is where we all live.

In the body of the reader, the poem, when it speaks, reverberates; it will not reverberate unless the reader knows how it speaks and, in return, responds. There is no responsibility in the absence of response. One cannot be answer-

able in the absence of words or acts.

And so I think we ought to come out from under our umbrella. Who knows--the sun may be shining. It would make me, personally, very happy if we could establish closer connections with other professional organizations whose interests are allied with ours--with ASHA, with ATA, with ICA. But until the day comes--if it is ever to come--when related organizations find it mutually profitable to engage in collective solutions to common problems, I hope that SCA will not unintentionally weaken itself by spinning off first one, then another of its constituents. Nor that, on the other hand, it see itself simply as an umbrella for three, with one hanging desperately on to the handle while the others bunch up fearfully for protection. Under an umbrella, one person always comes off best. But an umbrella is for bad weather.

Our weather looks to me pretty good. Clouds still, of course. And fair weather doesn't mean happiness, comfort, health, or wealth. But it does mean that you can see where you are going, and you can see the skies and the trees--and, unhappily, the income tax. You can tell that in trying to get out of one metaphor I am running head-on into dilemmas with others. That's all right. We're trying to get the parties together. No one metaphor will do it. But it's time to get rid of the umbrella. As I see it, we're far closer together than that crowd under the umbrella can ever be.

--Wallace A. Bacon
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Footnotes

1 "Perspectives on a Discipline: Review and Commentary," Communication Yearbook I (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Books), pp. 29-36.

2 All citations from Berlo are from his essay "Communication as Process: Review and Commentary," Communication Yearbook I (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Books), pp. 11-28.